

## The Nazi Hospital in Thessaloniki and the Murals of its Air Raid Shelter

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### *Abstract*

A preexisting general Hospital hosted the Nazi Hospital during the German occupation of Thessaloniki. In its courtyard, the Nazi Germans had built an underground air raid shelter. This study presents the available literature on the Ottoman and Greek history of the building and the Nazi Hospital operation with emphasis on the three murals found in the small-sized operating theatre of the air raid shelter. The potential identity of the Nazi writers and the period of inscription are obscure. The first mural admits that the enemy is better armed and has a reasonable degree of human desperation after a long-lasting war, realizing that victory could come via weapons of mass destruction rather than fighting on the battlefield. The two other murals referring to two distinct places in the Balkans, including the Varda Mountain and Demir Kapija Canyon, had been chosen by the Nazi writers as the most desirable places for future settlement after military retirement. They indicate the hope for victory, even if it means using biological weapons, and a sunny piece of the writers' nature, considering the potential desire for family life in a small home in the landscape of the idyllic rising sun among the mountainsides.

**Keywords:** Nazi Hospital, Thessaloniki, air raid shelter, murals.

### 1. Introduction

A systematic study of Nazi German history is valuable for future generations to comprehend the reasons for the devastating Second World War. A preexisting General Hospital in the city center of Thessaloniki hosted the Nazi Hospital during the German occupation. The Germans constructed an underground air raid shelter in its courtyard. The Hospital returned to regular activities soon after the Axis defeat. In 2017, the air raid shelter opened to the public to commemorate the Hospital's 100 years of operation. This study reviews the available bibliographic findings in the Ottoman and Greek history of the building and the Nazi German Hospital operation. However, the primary purpose of this work is to present the three murals found in the small-sized operating theatre of the air raid shelter and to discuss the potential desires and messages the Nazi writers intended to express.

## 2. Method and results

### 2.1 *Historical notes*

The available information about the construction time of the main building and its usage comes from the newspaper *Νέα Αλήθεια*. The construction of the building took place at the intersection of Hamidiye Avenue, named for the incumbent Sultan Abdul Hamid II, and Midhat Pasha Avenue, named for the author of the Ottoman Constitution. After the Young Turk Revolution, Hamidiye was renamed Union Avenue. The construction began just opposite the cemetery of the Greek community at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the foundation stone ceremony took place on May 1, 1909. It was built outside and close to the ruins of the eastern castle wall. The building had a central core with two lateral wings shaped like the Greek letter “Π”. It housed the Trade School of the Turkish Committee Union and Progress, and its cost exceeded 13,000 Turkish liras. Its arrangement was to the latest requirements of pedagogy and modern sanitary regulations. It had electrical installation and central heating. It accommodated 200 internal and several external students, most of whom attended for free. Still, postcards of that era refer to the building as the Mounted Ottoman Gendarmerie School. This divergence of opinion does not necessarily mean that one of the views is mistaken since its use could have changed. After the liberation of Thessaloniki from Turkish rule in 1912, it hosted the first Greek Gendarmerie School. This information and the stables in the courtyard (Figure 1) reinforce the view of its potential use as a Gendarmerie School in the final Ottoman era. In 1915, the Greek Red Cross established in the building its first Hospital (Kolonas, 1992; Πολυζωίδης, 1998).

- An existing General Hospital in the city center housed the Nazi Hospital during the German occupation of Thessaloniki.
- The Germans constructed an underground air raid shelter in the hospital courtyard. In its small-sized operating theatre, they painted three murals.
- The first mural admits that the enemy is better armed; it also has a legitimate amount of human desperation due to the long-lasting war.
- The two other murals mention Varda Mountain and Demir Kapija Canyon; these locations were deemed the most desirable for future habitation.
- All murals express optimism for victory, even if it means using biological weapons and a positive aspect of the writers’ personalities in light of the utopic pursuit of a return to a typical family life.

In early October 1915, the Allied Powers formed the Macedonian or Salonik(c)a Corp from divisions of the Gallipoli campaign to support the Serbian fight against the Central Powers and Bulgaria. In the summer of 1916, strong reinforcements from Allied forces disembarked in Thessaloniki (Mann & Wood, 1920; Falls, 1933; Moody, 2017; Salonika Campaign). Subsequently, the Greek Army established the “3<sup>rd</sup> Military Hospital” in the building, although it remained named “Red Cross Hospital” unofficially. The Hospital turned to full military operation in mid-February 1917 to serve the Allied Army of the Orient during the First World War. It was equipped by the British Army and reinforced with personnel from the French Red Cross. The increased combat casualties necessitated doubling its 200-bed capacity by deploying large tents in the neighboring eastern area. Its contribution during the great and destructive fire of Thessaloniki on 5 and 6 August 1917, was also invaluable. In October 1918, the capacity increased to 600 beds after two neighboring schools requisition. It was renamed “Central Refugee Hospital” after the “Asia Minor Catastrophe” of 1922 (Πανταζίδης, 1987; Κωνσταντίνου, 2009).

In 1941, the German occupying troops commandeered the building, and the medical staff and patients moved to a new location, a long distance eastward. After the withdrawal of the Germans, the hospital staff and patients relocated to the former building in 1945, renamed

“Central Hospital.” It received its recent name, “G. Gennimatas Hospital,” in 1995 (Γερασιμίδης & Παπανικολάου, 2022).

## *2.2 The Nazi Hospital and its air raid shelter*

The German Hospital had a capacity of approximately 300 beds. Most of the patients were ill or wounded German soldiers from the North African front, as well as prisoners. For security reasons, the occupying forces constructed a 3.5-meter high perimeter wall and an air raid shelter of reinforced concrete in the courtyard of the Hospital (Σούπαρης, 2022). The grounds of the air raid shelter included an operating theatre and patient rooms. According to unverified rumors and legends, an extensive network of underground corridors connected the air raid shelter with the nearby “Agios Dimitrios” Hospital, Hippodrome Square, and even the White Tower. It is not evident whether these corridors were German-built or ancient passageways (Figure 2). Unfortunately, the earthquake in 1978 and the reconstruction of the Hospital to increase its capacity destroyed most of the shelter and its underground corridors. Currently, two exits of the air raid shelter in the hospital courtyard are visible, but only one can go down the stairs. The Germans, during their evacuation, and the Greeks, after the liberation, destroyed most of the supplies and equipment. However, the heavy solid wooden doors sealed tightly with a rubber gasket on the frame case, one of the toilets, safety corridors above the shelter to blow out potential bomb explosion, dual power supply cables, plumbing and electrical installation, and the ventilation system are still evident (Μπούκα, 2016; Κιναλής, 2017; Σφαιρόπουλος, 2020; Φραγκούδη, 2020).

## *2.3 The Nazi murals*

There were drawings and text in each of the three murals. They were all drawn with exquisite calligraphy, but the explanation of the texts was not easy because they were all written in an old Bavarian script. Nonetheless, the research yielded specific findings that provided crucial hints related to the German invasion of the Balkans during both World Wars.

### *2.3.1 Mural 1 (Figure 3)*

“Bewaffnet sind wir alle sehr, die Banden jedoch besserer”

It means that we are all well-armed, but the gangs are more armed.

In April 1941, the German army invaded Yugoslavia and Greece, supported by Hungarian and Bulgarian forces (Pavlowitch, 2008). By the end of April, they occupied Athens and the whole mainland of Greece despite the brave resistance of the Greek and Commonwealth troops. Then, the German army attacked Crete in a massive airborne assault. According to General Kurt Student, commander of the invasion force, the fierce opposition from Allied soldiers and the Cretan people proved Crete “The graveyard of the German paratroopers” and a “Disastrous victory” (Yada-Mc Neal, 2018). The Cretan resistance altered the outcome of the Second World War since it was the most likely reason for the failure of the German invasion of the Soviet Union (Beevor, 2005; Blytas, 2009; Palazzo, 2017). Greece was the only nation to oppose both the dreaded Nazi and Fascist regimes of Hitler and Mussolini, as well as the “Pact of Steel” along with Great Britain. Adolf Hitler acknowledged that “The Greek soldier, above all, fought with the most courage” due to the brave Greek Resistance against the Axis Powers. Winston Churchill added, “Hence, we will not say that Greeks fight like heroes, but that heroes fight like Greeks” (Drez & Brinkley, 2009).

Soon after, resistance forces gradually emerged in the remote mountain regions of Yugoslavia and Greece. Two resistance groups developed in both occupied countries. In Yugoslavia, the Chetniks started as a resistance group that united Serb nationalist and royalist movements. However, they were soon embroiled in a brutal civil war against the communist partisans, led by Josip Broz, also known as Tito (Tomasevich, 2001; Bibb, 2009; War in the Balkans, 1941-45). The British, Americans, and Soviets supported the resistance groups in Axis-dominated territories by providing weapons and air-dropped supplies (Hogan, 1992; Nalmpantis, 2010; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021). The Greek resistance was among the strongest in Nazi-occupied Europe, seizing control of most of the country's highest mountain ranges (Woodhouse, 2002; Chatzistefanidou, 2020; Greek resistance 2023). One of the heroes of the Greek Resistance, Manolis Glezos, deserved to be called "The first partisan of Europe," according to General Charles de Gaulle (Souvlis, 2020). After the withdrawal of the German forces, the "Greek communist-dominated national liberation army" (EAM-ELAS) and the "National Republican Greek League" (EDES) entered into a disastrous civil war (Stassinopoulos, 2005; Sfikas, 2013; War in the Balkans, 1941-45).

It may be prudent to consider that this mural is referring to resistance fighters, also known as *andartes* (coming from the Greek word "αντάρω" meaning someone who revolted against a ruler) in Greece or partisans in Yugoslavia. It may also reveal that the resistance fighters received sufficient supplies to pose a significant threat to the Nazi German army.

### 2.3.2 Mural 2 (Fig. 4)

"Wenn man uns fragt wohin es geh; dann sagen wir nur A.D.W. (an den Warda)"

It means that whenever someone inquires, we respond that Warda is our sole destination.

The writer of this mural seems to refer to his first choice in terms of future settlement following the German victory in the war. The text, combined with the painted mountain, guided the research to the mountainous place of Warda. Varda (in German Warda) is a mountain on the Serbian border with Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Višegrad old Vlah area (Koykoudis, 2003, Varda). Fierce fighting erupted in the area during the Austro-Hungarian campaign against Serbia starting in August 1914. The Austro-Hungarian army captured Belgrade on 2 December 1914, but this was only for 14 days since its three efforts at the invasion of Serbia failed (Rothenberg, 1989; Fried, 2014b). The defeat of the Austro-Hungarian Empire by a small nation like Serbia questioned its legitimacy as a Great Power (Schindler, 2002). The failed invasion precluded the union of the Central Powers (or Germanic nations, including the German Empire, the Austrian Empire, and the Kingdom of Hungary) with the Ottoman Empire in the south, which had entered into the First World War (November 1914) on their side. A new Austro-Hungarian invasion with the help of German forces was attempted in 1915 from the north, while Bulgarians launched an eastward assault (Fried, 2014a; DiNardo, 2015). Although it started with formidable military forces, it finally failed due to the need to move large numbers of troops to the Carpathian front to confront the augmented Russian forces there (May to September 1915) (Tunstall, 2010; Buttar, 2015). Early in October, the Central Powers and Bulgaria attacked Serbia when Russia's menace on Austro-Hungary diminished. They conquered Serbia by the end of November 1915, driving their armies beyond its southern border with Greece. That allowed the Germans to send reinforcements to the Ottoman Empire via the Berlin-Constantinople railway (Various Authors, 2010; Hart, 2013; Green, 2014; Scudieri, 2016).

### 2.3.3 Mural 3 (Figure 5)

“Im Leben kommt’s bald spät bald früher, wenns dämlich kommt geht’s nach Kapija”

It means that ordinary living might return sooner or later, but when foolishness dominates, the time is right to go to Kapija.

This text indicates the Nazi writer’s desire to shelter himself in Kapija, which is probably his best option for a permanent settlement in the case that the outcome of the war turned out to be unfortunate.

The search for the location led to Demir Kapija (meaning “The Iron Gate” in Turkish) Canyon or Gorge (meaning narrow, the name of the old Roman city was Stenae, “Στεναί” in Greek). Demir Kapija is a small town in Serbian Macedonia (modern-day North Macedonia) and the capital of the homonymous municipality. Situated roughly 50 kilometers north of Gevgelis town, it is traversed by the Vardar River (Vardar/Vardarios, meaning dark or black water, Wardar in German, Axios in Greek). The Iron Gates are two limestone rocks that dominate the Vardar River at almost 300 meters in height and mark the beginning of the 31 kilometer-long Demir Kapija Gorge at its southeastern entrance (Micevski, 2020; Demir Kapija, 2023). The Iron Gates, which lay south of Skopje and beyond Mount Skardos, now known as Babouna, marked the northern boundary line dividing Ancient Macedonia from Dardania. Philip II of Macedon drew this borderline, and the Roman and Eastern (Byzantine) Empires maintained it. Additionally, the Skardos mountain range was the western boundary between Illyria and Macedonia (Heurtley, 1926; Andriotis, 1960; Karathanassis, 1991).

The text from the internet, which follows, answers the question about the activity of the German Empire in the region during the First World War: According to historical data, on May 1, 1916, the technical platoon of the German army began the construction of a road with the simultaneous opening of tunnels, following the order of Wilhelm II, German Emperor and King of Prussia. After two months and eight days, the road opened to traffic on 8 July 1916 (Figure 6). The project was part of the German war plans during the fight against the “French Army of the East” for a potential advance on the Macedonian front and their unification with the Ottoman army. German and Bulgarian forces initially conquered the territory during the First World War, but then Serbian and British military corps liberated it. During the Second World War, a sizable contingent of German and Bulgarian troops established themselves there due to the geostrategic position of the area, transforming the hamlet into a new fortress (History of Demir Kapija, 2018; Micevski, 2020).

## 3. Discussion

It is most likely that different individuals inscribed the murals, considering the differences in their handwriting, although there are some similarities in murals 1 and 3. In addition, the writers’ profession and the inscription’s time are still unknown. Regarding their profession, it is more likely that they were German military officers or soldiers than medical staff and less likely patients. Considering the strict adherence to the duty of the staff working in an operating theatre, it may be difficult to accept the mural inscription in an active operating room of a German Military Hospital at war. It is more likely that it occurred during the final months of the German occupation when the air raid shelter was potentially underperforming due to a lack of supplies and personnel. On the other hand, the medical staff would have experienced high emotional feelings in the cramped room, where so many people had their lives saved or lost, to consider writing notes on the walls.

Mural 1 demonstrates a certain amount of desperation, although there is no evidence that the writer didn’t fervently believe in the ultimate German victory. The scheme conveys the

hope that, eventually, the heavily armed enemy, even more than the Nazi Germans, will be destroyed through a type of chemical warfare by spraying a toxic substance. Murals 2 and 3 also express the hope that the war will turn victorious with the use of biological agents carried with mosquitoes. The mosquito drawing on murals 2 and 3 offers considerable help in estimating the inscription period. Heinrich Himmler, the leader of Schutzstaffel (SS) and Nazi German police, ordered the creation of the Dachau entomological institute in January 1942. In late summer 1944 and with great urgency, scientists looked into the life spans of various mosquito species for their life spans. They concluded that a particular anopheles mosquito, a genus well-known for its ability to transmit malaria to humans, could be kept alive long enough to be transported from a breeding lab to a distribution site (Reinhardt, 2013). Although there is clear proof that with the support of high-ranking Nazi officials, German scientists preceded forced sterilization, systematic euthanasia, human experimentation, and mass genocide programs, as well as active research on chemical or biological weapons, a Nazi German offensive biological weapons program never materialized (Cohen, 1998; Riedel, 2004). The drawing of the mosquitoes may indicate that the mural inscription took place during the last two months of the German occupation of Thessaloniki. It is most likely that it occurred during October 1944, considering that “late summer 1944” would more likely indicate September. In addition, this type of information could be available to German military and medical officers or even soldiers but was less likely to be available to patients.

German assault on North Africa coincided with the occupation of Greece. Soon after their arrival, the Nazis seized all food stocks, both public and private, along with clothing, medicine, military supplies, and transportation equipment to bolster the campaign in North Africa. In response, the Allies placed a naval blockade on Greece, preventing the import of necessities like grain. Thousands of people died daily in the major cities due to the severe famine that struck during the winter of 1941-1942 (Thomadakis, 1981; Kosmidis, 2016). Although starvation was not deemed a crime at the Nuremberg Trials, the concept of Starvation Genocide in Nazi-occupied Greece 1941-1944 has been recently promoted (Weisz, 2022).

The strategy of the Nazi Germans in Greece to respond to the fierce resistance of the population was to kill and destroy; their cruelty, as well as that of their Bulgarian allies, was superior to any previous foreign invader of Greece. Their economic exploitation led to hyperinflation, so the Greek people had to pay ten drachmas for a kilogram of bread in 1941 and 153 million drachmas in 1944. Properties, including land, houses, jewelry, and gold pounds, were traded for food or a liter bottle of olive oil (Mazover, 2001; Hionidou, 2004 and 2021; Georgoulas, 2023).

Despite the heroic resistance of the Greek people before and after the Nazi occupation, some Greeks collaborated with the occupying German forces. This controversial topic has remained taboo for nearly eight decades, but it has now been open to discussion. Research revealed an extensive degree and range of quisling. There were Greeks who sought collaboration with the Nazi Germans or offered it themselves directly for ideological, military, and economic reasons; some people were forced to cooperate, while others just tried to increase their prospects of survival (Dordanas, 2005; Vallianatos, 2014; Rigoutsou, 2018; Evangelidou, 2020; Zelepos, 2021; Χαραλαμπίδης, 2023).

A completely different way of collaboration involves several types of women’s intimate relationships and emotional links with the occupiers. Research has revealed that for many women in Greece, intimate relationships with the members of the Axis occupation army were the only way to survive a severe famine (Gildea et al., 2006; Škodrić, 2015). The fate of German-fathered war children in Greece, the so-called “Wehrmacht children”, has been ignored by historians (Muth, 2008).

Since the subject of Wehrmacht children is still taboo in Greece, we do not know much about them; however, it is evident that children fathered by German soldiers during World War II

suffered public humiliation. “German bastards” was a common moniker for them. Mothers faced discrimination as well, and the children suffered from having an unknown father and a stigmatized mother. There is no official record of the number of these children. However, scholars calculate that between 1941 and 1945, there were at least 200; nonetheless, this is an estimate and not an official count. Certain writers contend that poverty and mothers’ worries about discrimination prevented a large percentage of pregnancies from ending in births (van Versendaal, 2009). At the period, abortions were widely available in Greece, and there were rumors that the Orthodox Church supported women seeking abortions and promoted silence on the subject (Tzimas, 2006). Additionally, several German-fathered newborns and young infants could be left outdoors to perish after German evacuation from Greece, as detected on other occasions (War Children). Having been formally recorded as “father unknown”, German-fathered individuals have sustained years of ostracism and persecution. The Western European countries, now close allies, recently reached an agreement to provide dual citizenship and acknowledge their paternity (Expatica, 2009; Χρυσόστομίδου, 2018).

The Nazi Germans were the new owners of the land in the Balkans, with everything animate or inanimate on it. It is evident from the preceding remarks that some Germans, officers, or soldiers could have already started to live a new family life there. It is common sense that life in Yugoslavia or Greece would sound like paradise for most of them in the post-war period. These facts strongly support as reasonable the utopic quest that the calligrapher Nazi writers express in murals number 2 and 3 for a return to normalcy, away from the war and its attendant sufferings, and tranquil family life in these occupied territories.

The choice of the two specific areas (Varda and Kapija) by the Nazi writers of murals number 2 and 3 as desirable places of permanent future settlement was probably not made only because of their natural beauty. An equally important fact could be the events that took place and led to the loss of these regions by the Central Powers during the First World War. These areas, along with Greece, were already under the complete authority of Nazi Germany, and the writers expressed their conviction that the Balkans would be German territory in the future when the war would be a distant past!

#### 4. Conclusions

The time of the murals drawing in the operating theatre of the Nazi German air raid shelter is assumed to be October 1944, the final month of the German occupation of Thessaloniki. It is more likely that different individual German military officers or soldiers inscribed the texts than the medical staff or patients, and they reflect the Nazi belief that the war would turn out to be victorious even with the deployment of chemical or biological warfare. However, they express a degree of desperation since they realize that the situation on the battlefields had passed beyond Nazi German control. It also reveals a sunny piece of their human nature, considering the utopic quest for a return to normalcy and the potential desire for family life in a small home, in the landscape of the idyllic rising sun among the peaceful mountainsides, in the occupied territories.

#### Notes

1. N. K. S. is orthopaedic surgeon in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, “G. Gennimatas” Hospital, Thessaloniki.

2. N. K. S. is the author of the book entitled “Ο Διπλός Ξεριζωμός από τον Πόντο και τη Ρωσία” published in 2020, in Greek (reference No. 8).

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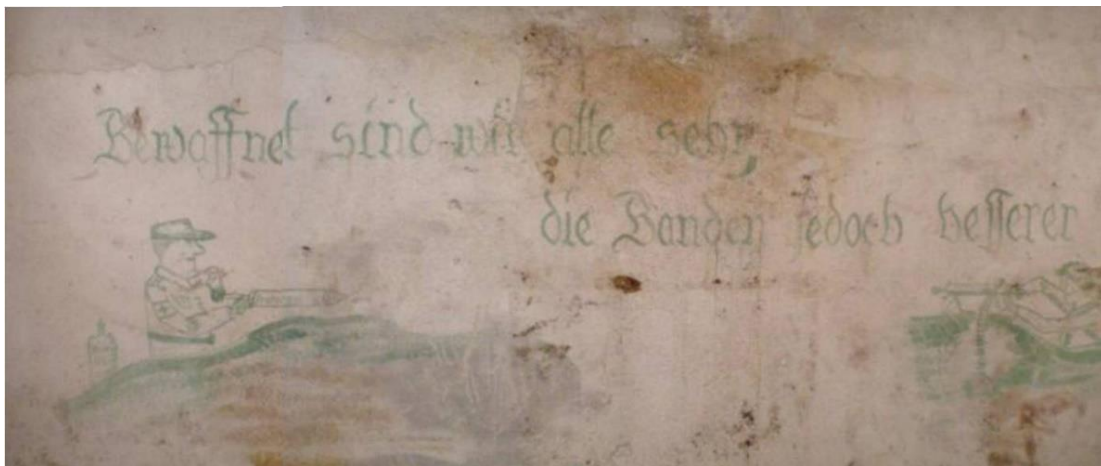


**Figure 1:** The rescued rings for tying the horses on the western surrounding wall of the Hospital, behind the central core, indicate the localization of the stables in the initial building and that this part of the surrounding wall has remained unchanged through all these years. The space hosted the oil tank some years ago (top view). The Hospital wall is very close to the eastern castle ruins (black arrow). The tower connecting the eastern and northern castle walls is also visible (bottom left view). Viewing from the other side of Agiou Dimitriou (renamed from the Ottoman Midhat Pasha) Avenue (Street), it is evident that the western surrounding wall of the Hospital lies between the ruins of the castle and that of the outwork (white arrow), which strengthened the fortification (bottom right view).



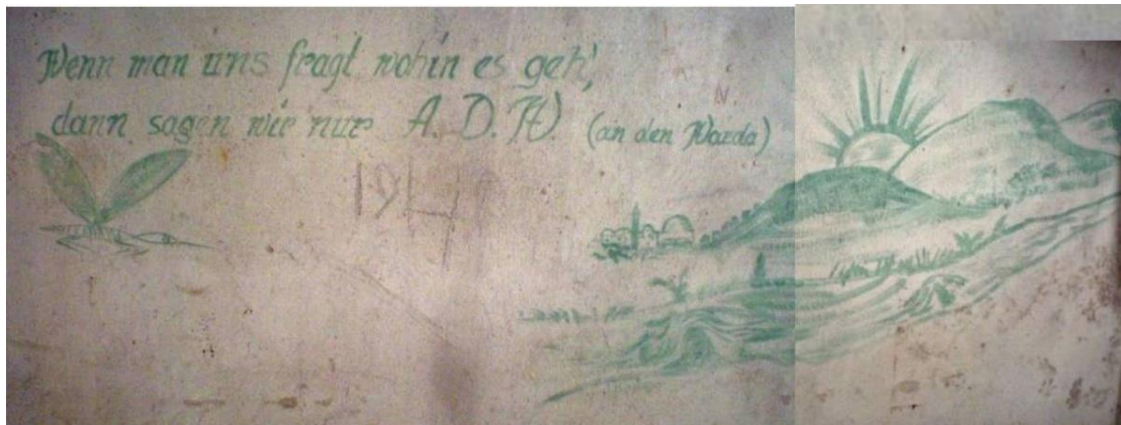


**Figure 2:** Remains of an ancient underground corridor. It passes just a few meters below the ground floor of the Hospital. It runs parallel to Agiou Dimitriou Avenue and potentially leads far outside in an eastward direction. Its construction is similar to that of the castle. It is high enough for civilians, soldiers, and domestic animals to move along. The Nazi Germans probably used the arcade as an anti-aircraft shelter for personnel and patients during British air strikes and constructed the place to sit.



**Figure 3:** Mural 1: "Bewaffnet sind wir alle sehr, die Banden jedoch besserer"

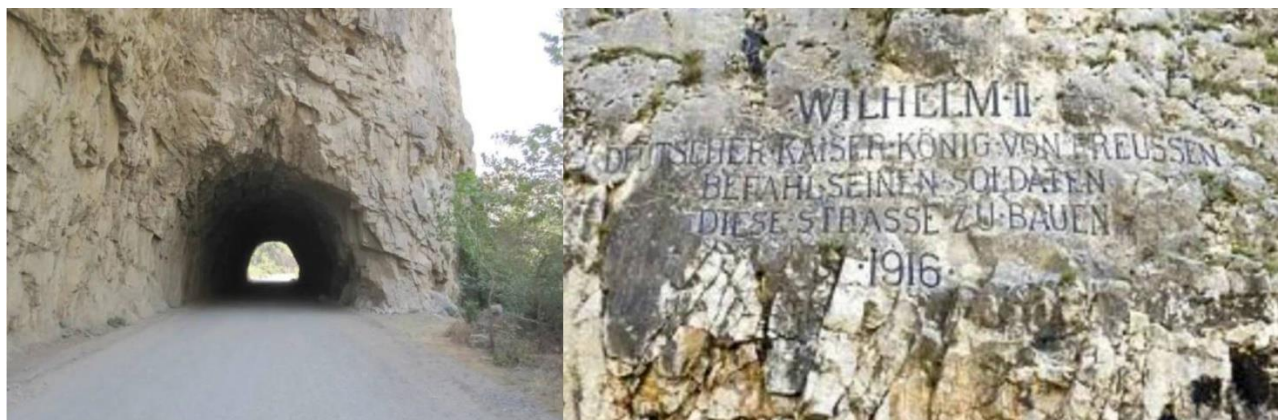
Protargol, inscribed on the syringe, has been used for the treatment of gonorrhea since the 19th century. It can potentially cause asphyxia when inhaled.



**Figure 4:** Mural 2 – “Wenn man uns fragt wohin es geht; dann sagen wir nur A.D.W. (an den Warda)”



**Figure 5:** Mural 3 – “Im Leben kommt's bald spät bald früher, wenns dämlich kommt geht's nach Kapija”



**Figure 6:** On the left, a view of the tunnel built during the First World War. On the right, the commemorative inscription on its entrance of the German tunnel builders carved on the rock: “Wilhelm II Deutscher Kaiser König von Preussen befahl seinen soldaten diese strasse zu

bauen 1916,” meaning “Wilhelm II German Emperor and King of Prussia ordered his soldiers to build this road in 1916.” The French army had extended the tunnel and added themselves to the inscription as contributors. However, during the Nazi occupation, the Germans blasted the French part away. <https://mymacedoniablog.wordpress.com/sightseeing/south-east-macedonia/demir-kapija/>.

